

New York Public Welfare Association

NYPWA Testimony on the Executive Budget for SFY 2018-19 for the Joint Legislative Budget Committee Public Hearing on Human Services

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The New York Public Welfare Association (NYPWA) represents all fifty-eight local departments of social services statewide. Our members are dedicated to improving the quality and effectiveness of social welfare policy so that it is accountable to taxpayers and protective of vulnerable people.

We Are All in This Together

Remove NYC Child Welfare Funding Cap

The Executive Budget places a cap on State child welfare reimbursement to New York City—a move that unintentionally places children at greater risk. The proposed cap would cover five areas: child protective services (CPS), preventive services, independent living, after care and adoption administration. Such a cap in any area of the State—let alone New York City—would result in higher CPS caseloads, reduced preventive services, and increased out-of-home placements. The commitment to prevent child maltreatment, protect children at-risk of abuse and steer youth away from the path to adult prison remains unchanged. Counties have witnessed firsthand the cost-effectiveness of successful preventive programs, which ultimately reduce detention stays and placements—goals intrinsic to the State’s effort to Raise the Age of juvenile jurisdiction.

The needs of vulnerable children in New York City are the same as those in other parts of the State. Child protective and preventive services play an essential role in keeping children safe and in minimizing out-of-home placements.

The services that are targeted were previously capped in the Family and Children’s Services Block Grant from 1995-2002. During that time, preventive services declined and foster care placements increased. In 2002, as a result of lessons learned from that experience, these funding streams were returned to their original open-ended status. There is now a 62 percent State and 38 percent local share, net of any federal contribution. There is no value in re-instating a capped system, which previously reduced services to children at-risk and led to increases in foster care.

A reduction in state funding would prevent us from continuing to meet the needs of vulnerable children. We urge you to maintain open-ended funding for children’s services statewide.

There's No Place Like "Close to Home"

Restore funding for Close to Home

Close to Home has benefitted both the State and New York City youth. The State was able to move City residents out of State-operated facilities, and fewer youths were arrested and placed in detention. This is a successful program, and the State should maintain funding. The proposed elimination of Close to Home funding has shaken all confidence that the State would fully fund Raise the Age.

Financing Raise the Age

We have five recommendations that are needed to demonstrate the State's long-term financial commitment to Raise the Age of juvenile jurisdiction:

- The State must fully restore the State share of funding for Close to Home.
- The requirement to prove financial hardship should be removed from the legislation. The commitment to pay 100 percent of the cost of Raise the Age should be absolute and financial hardship should not be a prerequisite for funding.
- The proposed budget needs to specify the details for the \$100 million investment.
- The State needs to provide guidance on what expenses will be reimbursable before county plans are submitted.
- The State should anticipate that flexibility will be needed during a transition period and make waivers available as we gradually progress to full implementation.

Comprehensive Homeless Service Plan

Remove Proposed Language on Comprehensive Homeless Service Plan Penalties

Local districts are working in close collaboration with the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) on housing. As a result, there is no need to add new mandates or fiscal penalties. The outreach requirements are being met primarily through not-for-profit agencies and other groups that collaborate with local districts for eligibility determinations and public benefits. To maximize efficiency, we recommend that the State rely on the entities that are already funded to prepare plans, collect data, and issue reports—including HUD's Continuum of Care (CoC) and other programs. Data can be provided directly to OTDA by all of the entities performing this work. These organizations can upload or enter their sheltered/unsheltered homeless data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)—and data can also be used from OTDA's WMS/BICS systems. Homeless outreach efforts that are not entered into HMIS can also be uploaded by each entity into the Shelter Management System.

Every new requirement has a cost, and we need to utilize work that is already being done by other entities instead of adding multiple layers of oversight. The LEAN process should be pursued by the State to reduce duplication. By avoiding this extra administrative burden, local districts will have more time to prevent homelessness and work with people to establish permanency.

Discharge Planning for Geriatric Parole

The budget includes language to expand opportunities for "Geriatric Parole" for inmates age 55 and older suffering from a "chronic, serious condition, disease, syndrome or infirmity" and who can no longer take care of themselves. The focus is on medical expenses, but our concerns are on other matters. It is important that explicit language be added to the budget bill that confirms that it is entirely the State's administrative and fiscal responsibility to provide, or contract with an agency to offer, all the services that may be needed—including housing, home care, case management, nursing home placement, and other assistance.

We must ensure that the discharge plan calls for the State to cover all the parolee's needs without relying on local government agencies—and that individuals are not discharged into the shelter system or into motels, hotels, or boarding homes. It is not unusual for discharge plans to fall apart (for example, families may change their mind once a person moves in and is too much of a burden for them), and we want to ensure that the State will take responsibility for the parolees for the rest of their lives and not shift the State's role to counties.

A Shelter from the Storm Must Lead to a Home to Call One's Own

Local social services commissioners and their staff are committed to serving vulnerable children and adults in New York State. In recent years, the issue of homelessness has made headlines—and efforts to combat the problem have occurred at the State and local levels to help ensure access and improve safety at shelters across the State. Multiple State inspections, audits and regulatory changes affecting shelters, hotels, and motels have impacted every county. These are important steps, but the best way to keep people safe and warm is to prevent homelessness in the first place. Temporary emergency housing is like using a hospital emergency room. It is important that it is available in a crisis, but it is better to maintain stability and prevent emergencies by providing sufficient resources. We need low-cost, permanent housing options in order to avoid homelessness altogether. When we can prevent evictions and provide people with supportive services, we can achieve success. Once people are on the streets, the battle becomes much tougher.

We **recommend** the following actions:

- Restore the partnership on State/local funding for the Safety Net Assistance program.
- Re-evaluate the definition of hardship to include homelessness and to determine how we might reallocate the TANF block grant accordingly, consistent with existing federal rules.
- Support efforts to utilize Medicaid for supportive housing and health homes initiatives—and engage OASAS and OMH in funding solutions for people struggling with addiction or mental illness.
- Develop strategies that lead people from temporary to permanent housing without creating conditions that significantly lengthen time on public assistance.
- To support our collective efforts to shelter people from the frigid weather, we recommend that the homeless shelter financing system provide sufficient funding to address the State’s Cold Blue policy—which requires that counties serve everyone, including sanctioned clients and aliens. There currently exists a dual system—Code Blue, where all are welcome to shelter during inclement winter weather, and non-Code Blue, where people must meet eligibility and employment requirements.
- Reject a one-size-fits all approach—counties need flexibility to address unique, regional housing needs. Motels/hotels play a critical role in counties that are less densely populated. They should not be covered by the same regulations governing the shelter system.
- Safeguard against over-regulation and unfunded mandates—we can provide safe housing but we need state policies that accept a variety of safe choices. We cannot afford to lose reasonable options when there is a shortage of housing stock and alternatives.

Rebuilding the NYS’s Safety Net Commitment

The Safety Net Assistance (SNA) program is a response to Article XVII of our State Constitution, which proclaims that “The aid, care and support of the needy are public concerns....” However, the State only funds 29 percent of benefits to recipients and none of the administrative expense. The SNA program serves adults who are not eligible for TANF and families who have exceeded the 5-year time limit. In fact, families make up a significant portion of the expenditures for SNA benefits. The program, which is entirely controlled by the State, was funded 50/50 State and local shares until April 1, 2011, when the State increased the county share of Safety Net funding to 71 percent and reduced the State share to 29 percent. Initially this was offset by fully federalizing both State and local family assistance costs, but we have reached a tipping point where counties are losing money. The time has come to restore 50/50 shares of funding. In addition, we recommend that the State increase its reimbursement to counties for housing costs in places where the funding is inadequate to provide shelter.

Projected Impact of Ongoing Foster Care Block Grant Cut

Local districts reduced foster care caseloads by 20,000 over the last 14 years. In doing so, they used the savings to invest in preventive services to keep children safe at home. Cutting foster care by \$62 million statewide last year, and continuing this year, will reduce local funds available to invest in preventive services, leading to more youth in out-of-home placements. Restoring the \$62 million would put the State back on track in minimizing foster care days.

Every New Policy Directive Comes with a Price: Be Mindful of New Mandates

Local administrative costs are rising, and there is currently no State administrative funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or for Safety Net Assistance. In 2017 alone, local districts received a combined total of nearly 90 policy directives from OCFS and OTDA. This sum does not include those from the Health Department or new regulations and legislative changes enacted in 2017 that impact social services—including those related to shelter operational plans and Code Blue. In key areas, we recommend that the LEAN approach be used before new rules are issued to ensure that processes are not made more cumbersome.

In closing, we wish to thank the NYS Assembly Ways and Means and NYS Senate Finance Committees for your leadership in bringing attention to the challenging fiscal and policy issues affecting social services.

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